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TEIRESIAS AND THE SNAKES

‘Ησίοδος δέ φησιν ὅτι θεασάμενος περὶ Κυλλήνην ὄφεις συνουσιάζοντας καὶ τούτους τρώσας ἐγένετο ἐξ ἀνδρὸς γυνή, πάλιν δὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς ὄφεις παρατηρήσας συνουσιάζοντας ἐγένετο ἀνήρ.¹

With these words the mythographer Apollodorus tells the well-known story of the mutation of sex which the Theban seer underwent, and he refers, correctly no doubt, to Hesiod as his authority. This fact naturally furnishes a *terminus ante quem* for the tale and gives it considerable antiquity. As for its contents, rather curious to be sure and quite isolated even among the treasures of Greek lore which have come down to us, Sir J. G. Frazer, in his Apollodorus commentary,² mentions a number of parallels for the belief that it brings on bad luck to watch snakes copulating, all of them, be it noted, hailing from India; but there is no example to show that it has the same consequence (unlucky or not) as in the Greek tale. Nor has an adequate explanation been found so far to account for this particular consequence of Teiresias' indiscretion.

On the other hand, it is well known that snakes, in folk-tradition all over the Old World, have the power to confer various supernatural and highly desirable boons upon man. To remain in Greece, Melampus, Kassandra and Helenos become seers after their ears have been cleansed by snakes, whereupon they are able to understand the cries of animals and all the sounds of nature.³ In particular, the ability to understand the language of animals is attributed to snakes, and it passes to man either as a free gift of the snake or by man's eating part of the snake's flesh, more especially its heart.⁴ Since Teiresias is the greatest

¹ Apollod. III. 6. 7: But Hesiod says that he (i. e. Teiresias) beheld snakes copulating on Kyllene, and that having wounded them he was turned from a man into a woman, but that on observing the same snakes copulating again, he became a man. For the variants of this story cf. Sir J. G. Frazer, Apollodorus, *The Library*, London, 1921, I, 364; Roscher's *Lexikon*, V, 180-82.

² *Op. cit.*, I, 365.

³ Roscher, V, 182.

⁴ Bolte-Polívka, *Märchen-Anmerkungen*, I (1913), p. 131; A. Aarne, *Der tiersprachenkundige Mann und seine neugierige Frau*, Hamina,

of all seers, according to Hellenic tradition, one would rather expect that his encounter with the snakes should have been the means to obtain for him those supernatural powers; but instead we find this most important fact in his earthly career connected with an altogether different and highly banal story in which no snakes of any sort appear. Having seen Athena taking her bath, unwittingly, he is struck with blindness by the angry goddess; but at the request of his mother, a nymph, she confers upon him the gift of prophecy, as a consolation as it were.⁵ Textual criticism, a comparison of the different known variants, is, considering the nature of our source material, productive of no decisive results. It remains to be seen, however, whether some non-Hellenic material may not suggest a solution of the enigma.

I begin by summing up an episode from the *Munipaticaritram*, a Prakrit work:⁶

King Brahmadatta of Kämpilya once lost his way in a forest where he saw a Nāginī (i. e. a female snake of the divine Nāga species) copulating with a Gonasa snake. Angry at this immorality, the puritanically-minded king struck the couple with his whip, and they both disappeared. On returning home, he told his wife of his adventure. As he left the house again, he encountered outside the Nāga himself, who had come with the intention of killing him. For he had been told by his wife that the monarch had wanted to seduce her, and since her virtue had proved unrelenting, that he had struck her that blow. However, the Nāga had just overheard the story as told by Brahmadatta to the queen and now was convinced of the king's innocence and his own wife's guilt. Out of gratitude he wanted to give him a boon, and the king desired the power to understand the language of all living beings. The Nāga did not fail to keep his promise and to grant the boon.

Substantially the same story occurs in the *Jatakam*, where however the unchaste female snake is a daughter of the Nāga.⁷

1914, p. 28 (*FF Communications* No. 15). W. R. Halliday, *Greek Divination*, London, 1913, p. 77; 83; 88; Tawney-Penzer, *The Ocean of Story*, London, 1924 ff., II, 108.

⁶ Roscher, V, 183-84. On another variant of the tale cf. Roscher, V, 183.

⁷ Th. Benfey, *Kleinere Schriften*, II, 1 (Berlin, 1892), p. 234. For a very close variant cf. G. Rosen, *Tuti-Nameh*, Leipzig, Insel-Verlag, s. d., p. 363.

⁷ Julius Dutoit, *Jatakam*, München-Neubiberg, s. d., III, 298 sqq.

Nor has it lost its popularity in more recent times; on the contrary, it is still current in India, as may be seen from oral versions collected in the last century.⁸ From India it migrated as far west as North Africa and the countries of the Caucasus.⁹

In this story, whose Indian origin has been proved,¹⁰ the events follow one another in a clear and logical order. The hero witnesses the adultery of a female snake, punishes it, and is rewarded, by the male snake and legitimate mate of the adulteress, with the gift of understanding the language of animals. Compared with this narrative, the Greek tale of Teiresias makes the impression of an epitome (the adultery feature having been omitted) and of a wrong combination of incidents (the mutation of sex, as a punishment for one does not know what sin, having taken the place of the reward mentioned in the Indian story).

This explanation, though purely conjectural so far, would probably appear quite plausible if we could establish, with some success, a *point d'attache* for the episode of the mutation of sex, which is at present hanging loose in the air so to speak. Now it is well to remember that the conferring of the gift of prophecy upon Teiresias was the consequence of another incident, referred to above,—his beholding the goddess Athena naked. So the question presents itself: Can it possibly be that the two episodes belonged originally together, that the change of Teiresias' sex was originally the punishment for his indiscretion of beholding the goddess Athena naked? I think that a good case can be made out to show that this was actually so in the lost archetype and that the extant texts are all derived from one which had inadvertently destroyed this logical order.

To begin with, the punishment of changing the sex of the offender was often inflicted for the offence of which Teiresias is guilty. Thus Antoninus Liberalis, after the poet Nicander, alludes to the story of Siproites:¹¹

⁸ The reader will find a list of them in Aarne, p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63-65.

¹¹ Μεταμορφώσεων Συναγωγή, XVII. 6: . . . finally the Cretan Siproites had also been transformed, because on the hunt he had seen Artemis bathing.

μεταβαλεῖν δὲ καὶ τὸν Κρῆτα Σιπροίτην, ὅτι κυνηγετῶν λουομένην εἶδε τὴν Ἀρτεμιν.

But essentially the same sort of tale is known in Northern Europe, whilst it occurs also in one of the earliest monuments of Indian poetry, the poem *Purûravas and Urwasi*, where it forms the opening chapter. A Silesian legend reads as follows:¹²

A certain nixe (Wasserlisse) forbade a shepherd boy strictly to watch her; but unmindful of the warning, he disregarded the prohibition and came upon her, beholding her (evidently naked). She gave him three blows in the face and transformed him into a (female) nixe.

In the Indian poem, King Ila surprises the god Śiva with the daughter of a mountain giant on a meadow and is cursed by the goddess to be henceforth a woman.^{12a}

It may then be considered as reasonably certain that in the lost archetype of the Teiresias biography the hero became a seer in much the same manner in which king Brahmadatta obtained the power to understand the language of animals and that he was metamorphosed into a woman after having beheld Athena naked. But we have not yet explained his second metamorphosis by which he becomes again a man. In the extant texts the remedy is very simple: after a number of years he witnesses again snakes copulating, slays or wounds one of them and instantaneously finds himself again a man. This invention is transparent enough, and analogues in the realm of folklore are indeed not

¹² *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, V (1895), p. 126. Cf. also the commentary of K. Weinhold on this story.

^{12a} A. Essigmann, *Sagen und Märchen Altindiens*, II, Berlin, 1920, p. 69. Being a prelude as it were to the story proper, it does not occur in the oldest text of *Purûravas and Urwasi*, which is contained in the *Rig-Veda*. Cf. also J. Hertel in *Wiener Zeitsch. f. d. Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XXV, 153; Keith, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1913, p. 412 ff.; W. N. Brown, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XLVII (1927), p. 13. It should be noted that the Indian superstition, mentioned at the outset of this study, according to which it brings on bad luck to watch snakes copulating, has probably no other origin. The fact is that in India the Nâgas are divine beings to all intents and purposes, and any indiscretion on the part of a human being with regard to them will therefore draw upon him some punishment; cf. Tawney-Penzer, *The Ocean of Story*, London, 1924-28, VII, 227.

lacking.¹³ It is clear, however, that if the first snake episode has to go (at least in connexion with the metamorphosis story), the second also loses its *raison d'être*, and the question must be answered: How did Teiresias regain his original sex when the first metamorphosis had nothing to do with the snakes? The solution is furnished by another episode of the seer's life.

Apollodorus, again drawing on Hesiod, relates the following story:¹⁴

διόπερ Ὡρα καὶ Ζεὺς ἀμφισβητοῦντες πότερον τὰς γυναῖκας ἢ τοὺς ἄνδρας ἥδεσθαι μᾶλλον ἐν ταῖς συνουσίαις συμβαίνοι, τοῦτον ἀνέκριναν. ὃ δὲ ἔφη δέκα μοιρῶν περὶ τὰς συνουσίας οὐσῶν τὴν μὲν μίαν ἄνδρας ἥδεσθαι, τὰς δὲ ἐννέα γυναῖκας. ὅθεν Ὡρα μὲν αὐτὸν ἐτύφλωσε, Ζεὺς δὲ τὴν μαντικὴν αὐτῷ ἔδωκεν.

Incidentally, we find here another explanation of Teiresias' supernatural powers, again, be it noted, granted to him as an indemnity as it were for his blindness. Few will be inclined to take these explanations for an old feature of his legend, the less so because there existed even a third: Teiresias was struck with blindness as a punishment for his betraying the secrets of the gods to men. If we remember that the seer Phineus and a number of ancient poets, among them Homer, were reputed to have been blind and if we bear in mind that in many primitive societies seers as well as poets and minstrels were and often still are apt to be blind, no explanation whatever is needed to account for Teiresias' blindness. One will rather take it for granted and hence regard all explanations as made *ex post facto*, when the true reason was no longer understood, the ancient state of society having passed.

Coming back now to the jolly story about the Olympian couple and their little dispute, it is clear at once that it cannot have

¹³ Cf. for example the wide-spread tale of the man who watches a ghostly procession (wild hunt) from behind a tree and is struck blind. The following year, at the same time, he goes to the same tree and is cured of his blindness.

¹⁴ *Bibl.* III. 6. 7: Hence, when Hera and Zeus disputed whether the pleasures of love are felt more by women or by men, they referred to him for a decision. He said that if the pleasures of love be reckoned at ten, men enjoy one and women nine. Wherefore Hera blinded him, but Zeus bestowed on him the art of soothsaying.

been invented to explain the seer's blindness. If the necessity of such an explanation was felt, there were at least two others available, both equally plausible, and the punishment inflicted by Hera is far from appropriate for the particular offence (if an offence it was) which his truth-telling called for. Since there exists no trustworthy chronology of the various adventures of the Theban seer, we cannot tell at just what point of his career this episode took place. Only one thing is certain: it must have been after his first metamorphosis, or else he would not have had the necessary experience to pronounce himself with authority on such a delicate question. If that was so, what more appropriate and logical vengeance could Hera have taken than that of reducing the ratio of his own enjoyment most drastically, i.e. by retransforming him into a man?

This conjecture may appear extremely bold, but it will be fully borne out, it is hoped, by another application of the comparative method. In an episode of the Indian *Mahâbhârata*¹⁵ a king is transformed into a woman by bathing in a river.¹⁶ He leaves his kingdom to his 100 sons and retires into the forest. There he gives birth to 100 more sons, whom he leads to his kingdom to share in the rule. But Indra sows discord between the two groups of sons and they all kill one another. Assuming the shape of a Brahman, Indra approaches him and asks him which of the two groups of sons he desires most to have brought back to life, those whom he had engendered as a man or those he had borne as a woman. Unhesitatingly, he chooses the latter, "for a woman loves more than a man." Asked whether he would like to regain his original sex, he prefers to remain a woman, "for woman has greater pleasure in love than man."

The striking similarity between this Indian story and the Greek tale of Teiresias is obvious and was duly noted by Th. Benfey.¹⁷ What is decisive for our study is the fact that here

¹⁵ Th. Benfey, *Pantschatantra*, Leipzig, 1859, I, 48. For another version cf. J. Hertel, *Indische Märchen*, Jena, 1921, p. 48 sqq.; *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XVII, 354 sq.

¹⁶ This is an extremely common feature in transformation stories of this type; cf. Brown, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, XLVII, 6 sqq.

¹⁷ *Op. et loc. cit.*; cf. also Hertel, p. 371.

the divinity approaches the hero after his *first* metamorphosis. He approaches him with virtually the same question and receives virtually the same answer as Hera and Zeus. Since there is no question of a dispute or a wager in the Indian text, no vengeance is taken on the seer. This quarrel between the god and his wife is unquestionably an addition to the story, made, it is almost needless to say, in post-Homeric Greece. If in the Asiatic original the hero preferred to remain a woman and said so, what more natural than to add the malicious vengeance of Hera referred to above, the more so because toward the end of his life, in his transactions with Oidipus and his family, Teiresias was represented as a man by the old epics?

The biography of Teiresias as thus reconstructed must have read somewhat like this: (1) Witnessing the adultery of a female snake, he punished it by wounding it and was rewarded by the grateful male with the power to understand the language of animals and the sounds of nature. (2) Coming upon a goddess, probably Athena, as she was bathing, he was transformed into a woman. (3) Called in as arbiter to settle a dispute between Zeus and Hera, he gave the well-known answer and was retransformed into a man by the angry and spiteful goddess.

Two of these episodes, to wit (1) and (3), occur in India in much the same form; (2) may be considered as universal. (1) is definitely known to be of Indian origin, and no Hellenic version, old or new, outside the Teiresias story, is known. In fact, no European versions of the theme are found west of the Don line and north of the Mediterranean. (3) occurs nowhere outside the Indian versions quoted above and the Teiresias legend. It should be added that the motif of the mutation of sex, though by no means confined to India, is extremely common there.¹⁸ On this showing, there is only one explana-

¹⁸ D. Comparetti, *Researches respecting the Book of Sindibâd*, London, 1882, p. 89; 134; J. Hertel, *Pantschâkhyâna-Wârttika*, Leipzig, 1923, p. 125 sqq.; W. A. Clouston, *A Group of Eastern Romances and Stories* (1889), p. 280, 300, 533, 540; *Zeitsch. d. Vereins f. Volkskunde*, V (1895), p. 128; E. Chavannes, *Cinq cents contes et apologues du Tripitaka chinois*, Paris, 1910-11, I, 265, 402; W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of Northern India*, London, 1896, II, 7; R. E. Enthoven, *The Folklore of Bombay*, Oxford, 1924, p. 104, 339; Tawney-Penzer, *op. cit.*, VII, 222 sqq.; Brown, *J. A. O. S.*, XLVII, 3-24.

tion possible which will satisfactorily account for the genesis of the Greek story: the two incidents (1) and (3) are of Indian origin and reached Greece in pre-Hesiodic times, no doubt by some Eastern trade route.

Some attention must be paid to the problem involved in this last statement.

Ever since the publication of Benfey's *Pantschatantra*, in 1859, the question of the presumed Oriental origin of European folk-tales has been foremost in all discussions bearing on the general problems of folk-tale genesis and folk-tale migrations. Making certain reservations and allowances, one is justified in saying that Benfey's view—rather intuitive than founded on exact scientific data—has been amply confirmed by subsequent research. Those reservations (aside from questions of method and procedure) are two in number. Benfey believed the migration of tales from Orient to Occident to be in the main a mediaeval phenomenon in which the Arabs and Mongols played a chief part. As for the latter, the late E. Cosquin showed, in 1913, that Benfey had greatly overestimated their importance for the transmission of tales.¹⁹ As for the rise of Islam and the rôle of the Mohammedan populations as an intermediary between India and Europe, we have too much direct evidence, from written sources, to call into question the essential correctness of Benfey's theory. However, it would be quite erroneous to assume that no such transmission could have taken place before the Mohammedan conquest of the Near East. Quite the contrary is true. In a recent book on the art of Herodotus Dr. Wolf Aly has discussed more at length the decidedly Eastern inspiration of the many early Ionian stories so charmingly told by this master story-teller.²⁰ The far-travelled tale of the *Matron of Ephesus* is most probably of Oriental origin.²¹ In a recent study of my own I tried to show that the famous Indian tale of the *Weaver impersonating Vishnu*, best known from a late re-cension of the *Panchatantra*, in an earlier form migrated to

¹⁹ E. Cosquin, *Les Mongols et leur prétendu rôle dans la transmission des contes indiens*, Paris, 1913.

²⁰ Wolf Aly, *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen*, Göttingen, 1921, *passim*.

²¹ V. Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes*, VIII (1904), p. 210 sqq.

Europe in Hellenistic times and was known to the Alexandrian geographer Mnaseas, who lived in the third century before our era.²² Lastly, the no less popular story of King Minos and his baneful power to kill his wives on the occasion of his first cohabitation with them, a story which undoubtedly goes back into prehistoric times, is but a modification of the Indian *Poison Damsel* motif, which thus must have reached Crete and Greece many centuries before Alexander's Indian expedition.²³ Thus there is no reason to doubt the essential fact of such a migration of stories and story incidents from India to the Near East and to Greece in antiquity.

At all events—and this point would perhaps deserve to be stressed—no importance can be attached to the fact that both in India and in Greece the tale of Teiresias' change of sex is somehow connected with the chief god, Indra and Zeus respectively. Stories such as this, outgrowths of mythological fancy and the work of poets and story-tellers, form no part of religion in its proper sense, and it would therefore be a serious methodical error in this connexion to speak of an influence of the Indian upon the Greek *religion*.

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MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

²² *Archivum Romanicum*, XI, 168 sqq.

²³ A. H. Krappe, *Mitteilungen der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, XXVIII, 131-36.